



MINISTRY OF HEALTH

Report on the
Special Welfare Needs
of
Deaf-Blind Persons

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MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE WELFARE
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S. Weaver, Esq.

Miss Winifred Bramhall, O.B.E.

A. Spencer Howard, Esq.

MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE ON THE WELFARE OF
THE DEAF ASSOCIATED WITH THE PREPARATION
OF THIS REPORT:

Councillor Miss May O'Connor, O.B.E. (*Chairman*)

K. P. McDougal, Esq.

Rev. E. R. Sowter

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With the agreement of the Chairman of the Advisory Council and of the Chairman of the Committee on the Welfare of the Blind a few minor editorial alterations have been made in this report in preparing it for circulation and small portions not of concern to local authorities have been omitted.

ADVISORY COUNCIL FOR THE WELFARE OF HANDICAPPED PERSONS

COMMITTEE ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF WELFARE SERVICES FOR BLIND AND PARTIALLY SIGHTED PERSONS

THE SPECIAL WELFARE NEEDS OF DEAF-BLIND PERSONS

1. The Committee in giving consideration to the special needs of deaf-blind persons consulted representatives of the voluntary organisations listed in the Appendix. The problem has been dealt with under two heads:—

the special needs of deaf-blind persons—

(A) living in their own homes ; and

(B) in need of care and attention, and in respect of whom residential accommodation under Section 21 of the National Assistance Act, 1948, is required.

2. Many attempts have previously been made to tackle this difficult problem in a practical way. Whilst the Committee does not claim to have solved it it feels that if the suggestions made are carried into effect by officers showing great patience and understanding and having a capacity to recruit voluntary helpers, they will go a long way to help the deaf-blind to widen their experiences and to enter to the greatest extent possible into the life of the general community. Numerically the problem is small but the small numbers (there are about 2,500 deaf-blind) conceal a great deal of loneliness and frustration.

A. The Welfare of Deaf-Blind Persons Living in their own Homes

3. The Blind Welfare Departments of local authorities and voluntary organisations for the blind have traditionally accepted responsibility for promoting the welfare of deaf-blind persons and, in general, have worked in close co-operation with the appropriate voluntary organisations dealing with deaf persons. The examination for the Home Teachers' Certificate of the College of Teachers of the Blind includes, as a compulsory subject, a knowledge of the facilities available to deaf-blind persons, and candidates are required to demonstrate their ability to converse with such persons by means of the manual method.

4. The blind person who becomes deaf has no previous knowledge of the "deaf world" and the deaf person who becomes blind is unable, to a large extent, to exercise the skill he has acquired in communicating with deaf sighted people, e.g., by "sign language" and lip-reading. It seems, therefore, that fundamentally this is a problem for the "blind world" as in both cases the person concerned is not likely to have a great deal in common with the sighted deaf person. Nevertheless, it is felt that organisations dealing with the deaf will have an important contribution to make, and whilst blind welfare services should include arrangements for deaf-blind persons these should be carried out in close consultation with those responsible for arrangements for promoting the welfare of deaf persons, to ensure that, amongst other things, a deaf-blind person may be dealt with in a manner best suited to his desires and temperament and to the promotion of his welfare. It follows that Home Teachers of the Blind should continue to deal with deaf-blind persons in general.

5. It is doubtful whether the majority of newly qualified Home Teachers have gained any great experience in dealing with the deaf-blind, either because they have not had sufficient time to devote to such persons or because there are none, or few, of such cases in their areas. It is thought that this lack of experience can be improved in the following ways, in relation both to uncertificated Home Teachers and to those who are qualified but have had little experience of this problem :—

- (a) by the provision at regular intervals of refresher courses for Home Teachers of the Blind, with special reference to the welfare of the deaf-blind, conducted by persons with special knowledge of the problems involved. Such courses might usefully be organised by the Regional Associations for the Blind ;
- (b) arrangements should be made under which uncertificated Home Teachers receive a thorough grounding in this subject, including the visiting of deaf-blind persons in their homes, in clubs and in Residential Homes. Where a particular authority have no deaf-blind person on the Register, arrangements should be made under which the Home Teacher is seconded or loaned to gain experience to a neighbouring authority having such cases. Useful training could be achieved by co-operation between the Home Teacher and the organisations dealing with the deaf ;
- (c) where the number of registered deaf-blind persons in a particular area justifies it, the local authority concerned should consider appointing a qualified Home Teacher possessing special experience of work amongst deaf-blind persons to advise generally on the welfare of such persons and to co-ordinate the work of other Home Teachers in dealing with them. Other local authorities should consider the possibility of making joint appointments for this purpose and whether the Regional Associations for the Blind, in consultation with the appropriate voluntary organisation for the deaf, could usefully play a part in the arrangements, e.g., by providing Regional Advisers ;
- (d) consideration should be given, in consultation with the voluntary organisations concerned, to the possibility of Home Teachers with a special interest in the welfare of the deaf-blind visiting Homes specially established for such persons, in order better to understand the problem, and how to meet it.

6. As a full understanding of the needs of the deaf-blind can only be reached by practical experience in visiting deaf-blind people, especially those who are born deaf, candidates for the examination of the College of Teachers of the Blind are often limited in this experience when presenting themselves for examination. The examination is framed therefore to test the candidates' theoretical knowledge of the subject and their ability to converse by means of the manual alphabet. If, however, the suggestions, so far as relevant, made in paragraph 5 (a)-(d) are implemented, the experience of candidates for the examination will, in time, be greater than is at present the case, and it is suggested that the College of Teachers of the Blind, in consultation with any other voluntary organisation concerned, should watch the position carefully and keep the syllabus for the examination in step with any such development.

7. As a general rule Home Teachers of the Blind should not be required to devote the whole of their time to the deaf-blind, unless a particular officer has a vocation in that direction.

8. The aims of the Home Teacher of the Blind dealing with deaf-blind persons should include:—

- (a) giving special attention to such persons and more particularly to their need of friendship and for contacts with other people and the general life of the community. This can only be achieved by regular visiting at frequent intervals, and by finding some means of communication and eventually teaching all those who are in close touch with the person to use those means.
- (b) assisting them to widen their experience, e.g., by:—
 - (i) enlisting the help of voluntary visitors and teaching them how to communicate with the person concerned, and arranging for them to supplement the visits of the Home Teacher and afford any necessary practical help in the home. It is said that ideally each deaf-blind person should have one “voluntary friend” to himself;
 - (ii) teaching Braille and Moon reading where practicable and Braille writing, and arranging for a supply of special embossed literature;
 - (iii) teaching typewriting and methods of using other writing devices, to suitable deaf-blind persons in order that they can communicate with the outside world;
 - (iv) encouraging correspondence with other persons similarly handicapped;
 - (v) establishing and organising special deaf-blind clubs (it is thought that, for instance, the handshake of a friend, and a “chat” by touch, mean more to deaf-blind persons than, for example, a concert might mean to blind hearing persons) and organising outings and other entertainments;
 - (vi) enlisting the interest and help of voluntary bodies dealing with the deaf;
 - (vii) teaching pastime occupations in suitable cases and, when justified, organising handicraft classes for the purpose;
 - (viii) bringing them into all suitable social activities, at the same time teaching and encouraging blind and sighted persons to communicate with them;
 - (ix) acting as interpreters during interviews and at other times;
 - (x) assisting in procuring special apparatus which may help them and others more easily to communicate;
 - (xi) taking all necessary steps to ensure that any residual hearing is tested and where possible made useful by the provision of hearing-aids and wireless headphones, and in particular ensuring that the power of speech is exercised and preserved.

9. Consideration has been given to the question of the number of deaf-blind persons with whom a Home Teacher could adequately deal, but it is thought that no hard and fast rule can be laid down at present. The position will vary between urban and rural areas, and will also depend upon the capacity of the individual deaf-blind person. Great patience must be exercised and much time devoted to the individual, and to the general welfare arrangements provided for the deaf-blind, if the lives of such persons are to be broadened and developed, and it is suggested that local authorities which have statutory

responsibilities towards deaf-blind persons should take these matters into account when considering the number of cases in respect of which a particular Home Teacher is responsible, and, if necessary, increase their staff accordingly.

10. The Committee is much concerned about the problems which arise with regard to the not unsubstantial number of deaf-blind children for whom special educational facilities cannot at present be provided and who consequently remain in the home environment which in many cases is unsatisfactory. The Committee appreciates that functions under the Education Act are not its concern, and that as in many other spheres the necessary facilities are at present difficult to establish. Nevertheless, having regard to the overall responsibility as respects the blind and ultimately the deaf which Section 29 of the National Assistance Act, 1948, places upon local authorities, the Committee considers that such cases can properly fall within the responsibility of the Welfare Authority where it is impracticable to deal with them under any other enactment, and that Home Teachers should use their best endeavours to assist such children and their parents. In this matter there will need to be the closest co-operation between officers of the Health, Education and Welfare Committees of the Authorities.

11. The Committee wishes to emphasise the importance of the provision of efficient interpreters (e.g., the Home Teacher or Deaf Missioner) where deaf-blind persons are involved in police charges or are before Courts of Law or being examined for the purpose of certification under the Mental Deficiency Acts. In 1933 the Minister of Health drew the attention of all local authorities to this matter as it affected the deaf in relation to certification under the Mental Deficiency Acts, and somewhat earlier the Secretary of State for the Home Department took similar action with Chief Constables and Courts. The Committee understands that the Ministry have no reason to think that these bodies have forgotten the advice given, and indeed consider that where a deaf-blind person is concerned, those responsible would make doubly sure. Nevertheless, the Committee feels that in view of recent social legislation the present is an opportune time for the attention of local authorities again to be drawn to this essential service.

12. The strain and tension under which many deaf-blind persons and their families live make the need for a regular change of environment even more desirable than in the case of blind hearing persons, and the general arrangements for their welfare should include provision to this end where the person concerned would otherwise not be able to have a holiday. More holiday homes for the deaf-blind are needed, and it is understood that a number of voluntary organisations are considering the possibility of increasing this type of accommodation. It is desirable that holiday homes specially provided for the deaf-blind should always accommodate a nucleus of permanent residents to ensure economic administration by the use of the premises throughout the year. It is not suggested that holiday arrangements for deaf-blind persons should be limited to holiday homes. In suitable cases they might be extended to include holidays in boarding houses and private apartments.

B. Deaf-Blind Persons in Need of Care and Attention, and in Respect of whom Residential Accommodation under Section 21 of the National Assistance Act, 1948, is required.

13. In order to ascertain the views of deaf-blind persons at present residing in various categories of residential accommodation on the question of the most suitable type of accommodation for such persons, officers of the Ministry

carried out a survey covering two Homes specially established for the deaf-blind, one Home specially provided for the deaf, seven Homes specially established for the blind, and two Homes established for the sighted aged. Deaf-blind persons were resident in each Home visited and forty-six such persons were interviewed. The Committee has considered the officers' report, together with memoranda submitted by the voluntary organisations referred to in paragraph 1 and has come to the conclusions which follow.

14. The Committee desires at the outset to stress certain points which, without detracting from the general principles it seeks to establish, should be taken into consideration when applied to individual Homes and deaf-blind persons. These are:—

- (a) the Committee does not suggest that any deaf-blind person at present residing in residential accommodation should be transferred elsewhere unless he so desires: what is said below concerns future admissions ;
- (b) the greatest factor leading to the happiness of deaf-blind persons in Homes is undoubtedly the quality of the staff who must be imbued with great patience and a sense of vocation, have a sympathetic understanding of the needs of deaf-blind persons, and be capable of willingly assisting in meeting those needs whilst at the same time encouraging the persons to acquire self-reliance and independence to the greatest extent practicable. Much will depend upon the staff's ability to recruit voluntary workers to assist them and, where the Home is one accommodating both deaf-blind and hearing persons, their ability to persuade other residents to master and use the manual language—or other means of communication—so that small groups of deaf-blind persons do not become isolated. It has been suggested from more than one quarter that in a Home accommodating both deaf-blind and hearing persons the staff may tend to take the line of least resistance and concentrate their efforts on those with whom they can most easily communicate, whereas an essential feature of the welfare of deaf-blind persons is the necessity to provide for those persons a large measure of individual care and attention ;
- (c) if practicable, a deaf-blind person who is to be admitted to residential accommodation should be given a choice in the matter of the type of Home in which he desires to reside, and where such a choice is an unhappy one, it should be corrected as soon as possible. To be near to relatives and familiar surroundings in a Home for Aged Persons may be a happier environment for a particular deaf-blind person than would be the case were he to be accommodated in a Home for the Deaf-Blind far distant from his home ; or a Home for the Deaf may be a satisfactory environment for a deaf-blind person who was born deaf and became blind later in life ;
- (d) where a deaf-blind person has power of speech or a degree of useful residual hearing (with or without an aid), steps should be taken to ensure that that power is exercised and preserved, and that the residual hearing is used to the fullest extent practicable. It is therefore suggested that such cases should be accommodated in Homes for the Blind in groups of not more than six in each Home.

- (e) where this has not already been done the position of all deaf-blind persons at present in residential accommodation should be reviewed in the light of the possibility of their securing some benefit by the use of hearing aids.

15. There appear to be two main categories of deaf-blind persons (other than those referred to in paragraph 14 (d) above):—

- (a) those with a “deaf mentality”, that is to say, in general those who were born deaf or became deaf in infancy, and
- (b) those with a “hearing mentality”, that is to say, in general those who became deaf later in life.

Within each category there appear to be two distinctive groups:—

- (i) those with a recognisable degree of fair or good “intelligence”; and
- (ii) those with what appears to be “intelligence” of a poor quality.

(For the purpose of this report the word “intelligence” is used in relation to a deaf-blind person to indicate his capacity to cope with everyday life and his ability to deal with questions put to him and to express himself; apart from this the word has no special significance.)

16. In considering the provision of residential accommodation there does not appear to be any important distinction to be drawn between two deaf-blind persons one having a “deaf mentality” and the other a “hearing mentality”, but both of fair or good “intelligence” or both of poor “intelligence”. The Committee’s conclusion is that the important factor is to ensure contact between deaf-blind persons at a similar or near level of “intelligence”. It is not thought possible to lay down any hard and fast rule and much will depend upon the history of the individual case, but it is believed that the degree of “intelligence” enjoyed by a deaf-blind person is largely influenced by the amount of education it has been possible to give him and this will determine the extent to which he will respond to attempts at further development. It follows, that in general, deaf-blind persons who were born deaf are likely to fall into category (a) (ii) “deaf mentality” with poor “intelligence” whilst those whose hearing continued into or beyond childhood are likely to fall into category (b) (i) “hearing mentality” with fair/good “intelligence”. There will be exceptions in both categories and careful classification is necessary.

17. In considering the provision of Homes for the deaf-blind, the Committee suggests that, subject to paragraph 14 above, a distinction should be drawn, not between persons in categories (a) and (b), but between persons in groups (i) and (ii) (see paragraph 15 above) in order that in such Homes there will be contact between the residents at a similar or near level of “intelligence”. It is not thought that any useful purpose is likely to be served by having both groups in one Home, in which event it is likely that the “intelligence” of those in group (i) may deteriorate and unlikely that the “intelligence” of those in group (ii) will be influenced or improved. On the other hand, by segregating the groups it is likely that those in group (i) will have the best chance of maintaining and in many cases developing the quality of “intelligence” they enjoy, by living with the greatest number of similarly handicapped persons with a like or superior quality of “intelligence”. This is not to say that no attempt by experts should be made in Homes for group (ii) cases to develop the “intelligence” of the residents so as to qualify them for group (i), in which event transfer should be effected.

18. So far as concerns the more elderly deaf-blind persons in group (ii), it is thought that active companionship for them does not mean very much, and it seems unlikely that they would desire to carry on a slow and intricate "conversation" with other residents, and doubtful whether they are capable of assessing the full measure of their handicap. The effort needed on the part of the person concerned to bring himself up to a standard high enough to enable him to do this might well lead to frustration and annoyance in what is a reasonably contented person. It is suggested that the principal needs of such persons are comfort, warmth, food, assistance in moving around, and, so far as this is practicable, some simple occupation.

19. The Committee has come to the conclusion that generally speaking and subject to paragraph 14 (c) above, Homes for the Deaf and Homes for the Aged do not provide a suitable environment for deaf-blind persons in need of care and attention.

20. Having regard to the greater degree of individual care and attention which deaf-blind persons require, and to the difficulties of recruiting suitable staff, the Committee suggests that Homes for such persons should be designed to accommodate a smaller number than is the case in Homes for the Aged. On the other hand, given a sufficiency of staff, there appears to be no reason to draw any distinction in this matter.

21. To sum up, the Committee considers that each deaf-blind person in need of residential accommodation requires careful classification and should be accommodated on the following basis:—

- (a) those with power of speech or some useful degree of hearing (with or without aids) are likely to be best dealt with in a Home for the Blind. (This assumes that the staff and residents of all Homes for the Blind accommodating a group of deaf-blind persons will make the necessary effort referred to in paragraph 14 (b));
- (b) others of fair/good "intelligence" are likely to be best dealt with in Homes for the Deaf-Blind specially established for that class;
- (c) others of poor "intelligence" are likely to be best dealt with in other Homes for the Deaf-Blind specially established for that class.

In order to secure the continuity of adequate care and attention, consideration should be given to the provision of Homes, or of Annexes to existing Homes, for the accommodation of deaf-blind residents who become physically or mentally infirm, and who necessarily spend a good part of each day in bed.

22. In the course of the survey referred to above, the following matters were stressed by several of the deaf-blind residents, and the Committee suggests that these points should be given serious consideration by local authorities and voluntary organisations providing accommodation for deaf-blind persons:—

- (a) the joy of having single rooms and of participating in handicraft occupations;
- (b) the importance of holidays and changes of environment. It was suggested that Homes of various types should provide holiday accommodation available to deaf-blind residents of Part III accommodation and others, where they could spend a holiday with a view to deciding in which type of Home they would be happiest. (It is understood that this policy is practised by the National Institute for the Blind):

- (c) the importance of securing the help of voluntary workers to take deaf-blind persons out and about. The deaf-blind greatly appreciate the efforts of the staff in this direction, but experience greater liberty and independence when they are taken out by "voluntary friends" ;
- (d) the desirability of providing a Social Club near the Home where the residents can mix with similarly handicapped persons residing in their own homes and with other persons ;
- (e) the joy of using a typewriter so as to be able to correspond with sighted persons ;
- (f) the desirability in Homes accommodating both deaf-blind and hearing persons of providing the deaf-blind with single bed-sitting rooms or with a quiet sitting-room, where they can retire either to avoid the "bustle" of the hearing residents or to use their typewriters or Braille frames without interfering with the hearing residents ;
- (g) the desire to be accommodated nearer to relatives and familiar surroundings.

23. The Committee has considered what special amenities and requisites should be provided in Homes for the Deaf-Blind, apart from those which ordinarily are provided in Homes for the Blind, e.g., safety devices and aids such as gated stairways, roped walks, specially adapted fire-escapes and so on. The following conclusions have been reached :—

- (a) a deaf-blind person lives under great stress, and it is desirable that he should have somewhere to go where he can be alone and know he is not going to be disturbed and overlooked. All Homes for such persons in group (i) should therefore provide a good proportion of single bed-sitting rooms. On the other hand, the more elderly, especially if infirm, may desire to share a bedroom with another person, and provision for this should be made. The foregoing applies, although to a lesser extent as regards single rooms to Homes for deaf-blind persons in group (ii) ;
- (b) because of the difficulties experienced by deaf-blind persons in moving around and getting exercise, homes established for them should be comfortably furnished and heated. Bed-sitting rooms should be provided with guarded heaters or be otherwise heated to enable the resident to occupy the room in comfort at any time of the day. Sitting-rooms should be provided with guarded open fires ;
- (c) all bedrooms should be "belled" to a central point continually manned during the night ;
- (d) on stairs a "keep left" rule for all residents should be imposed ;
- (e) the help of the local voluntary organisation for the deaf should be enlisted, both generally and as regards the provision of facilities for religious worship in particular ;
- (f) special attention should be paid to the provision of pastime occupations and, in view of the difficulties to be overcome, it seems desirable that where numbers justify it there should be a full-time instructor engaged for the purpose, although such instruction need not be his sole responsibility in connection with the running of the Home. Accommodation should be provided in or near to the Home where craft-work can be undertaken.

24. The Committee believes that there is a need for the provision of additional hostel accommodation near to Workshops for the Blind where deaf-blind workers may live—exclusively or with blind workers. A deaf-blind worker working in or near to his own home experiences no insuperable difficulties, but when circumstances change so as to make it impossible for him to live at home, e.g., the death of mother or wife, he will invariably have to be admitted to residential accommodation, which is unlikely to be near a workshop for the blind. Here he may become a “misfit”, because he will suffer frustration through lack of occupation and contact with his workmates : furthermore, as he is likely to be of the younger age range, he may prove to be overboisterous for other residents who are likely to be of the older age range.

25. To assist in overcoming the difficulty referred to in paragraph 24, it is suggested that in areas in which workshops for the blind are situated and in which local industries afford opportunities for the employment of suitable blind/deaf-blind persons local authorities and voluntary organisations should endeavour to establish a list of residents willing to accept blind/deaf-blind workers into their homes as lodgers.

February, 1951.

APPENDIX

- (a) The College of Teachers of the Blind.
- (b) The National Deaf-Blind Helpers' League.
- (c) The National Federation of the Blind.
- (d) The National Institute for the Blind.
- (e) The National Institute for the Deaf.
- (f) The National League of the Blind.
- (g) The North Regional Association for the Blind.
- (h) The Scottish National Federation for the Welfare of the Blind.
- (i) The Southern Regional Association for the Blind.
- (j) The Wales and Monmouthshire Regional Council for the Blind.
- (k) The Western Regional Association for the Blind.



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